



VAGABOND

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[Hobo Advice](#) Identifying Types of Train Cars that are Safe to Hop - A visual lesson in learning the difference between Boxcars, Intermodal Stackers, Grainers, and Piggybacks.
(self.vagabond)

submitted 2 months ago * by [huckstah](#) [Trainhopper / Hitchhiker](#)

One of the first questions a new hobo will ask is: How do I know which cars are safe to hop?

It's extremely important for a hobo to be able to identify train cars quickly, and know which one's are safe to hop.

Some cars are safe to ride, others are not, and some are just plain suicidal.

Often times when you are hopping a train, your time to choose a car is very limited, and you must quickly be able to identify which cars are safe to hop, and which cars are not. This fundamental knowledge can quickly determine life or death for a hobo, and in many cases, greenhorn "rookie" hobo's have died by catching the

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wrong car while the train is simply moving too fast.

For the sake of greenhorns killing themselves on the rails, let's take some time to demonstrate which train cars that are SAFE for hobo's to ride. By default, if you see a train car that is **NOT** listed in this description, consider that as a car that is **NOT** safe to hop.

Here is a list of cars that are safe to hop:

- **Boxcar** ([picture](#)): Most people are familiar with the box car, as it is the one you see most hobo's riding on in movies and books. Unfortunately, it is extremely rare to find an empty boxcar with its door open, but it does still happen. I would say less than 10% - 20% of boxcars have an open door, and that varies heavily depending upon which region of the USA you are in. Also note that boxcars do NOT have a low-hanging ladder, which makes them extremely difficult to jump on if the train is moving. There is a certain trick to mastering this maneuver, however I do not suggest this if you are carrying a backpack, as you will likely end up slinging yourself under the wheels of a 200-ton train.
- **Intermodal Stack** ([picture](#)) These trains are also known as "I.M.'s" or "Stackers", and it consists of intermodal freight known as cargo containers. These trains often go long distances, and usually have higher priority on the tracks than other trains. At the end of each cargo container, you can get into the lip of the bucket and ride with plenty of room, such as in [this picture](#). This is plenty of room to store your gear, and even lay down, stretch out, and take a nap

Vagabonds, Hobos, Hitchhikers, Trainhoppers, Squatters, Rubbertramps, Backpackers, and more.

Feel free to share stories and pictures about your adventures on the road, or share advice and tips with greenhorns and lurkers!

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in your sleeping bag. These cars have low-hanging ladders that make it easier for catching on the fly, but they require a bit of studying to figure out which intermodal cars are safe or unsafe for hopping. Some intermodal cars have "wells" or "buckets" at the end of each car, making them really safe places to ride. However, other intermodal cars have "bottomless floors" (no floor or safe place to sit/stand) and you should NEVER hop these unless you know EXACTLY where you are going, you are completely sober, and you have MANY years of trainhopping experience under your belt. And even then, you are still risking your life each and every time. Bottomline: if the intermodal car doesn't have a floor, don't take it. Check the next car down, and then the next car, and you'll eventually find one that has a good floor/well.

- **Grainers** ([picture](#)) - Grainers are great cars to ride, but there are several types of grainers, and not all of them are safe for hopping. As you can see in the picture, the grainer cars with a wide trim are safe to ride, and the grainers with slim/narrow trim are not safe to ride. The narrow/slim trim grainers do NOT have a porch or "bottom", and thus you will risk falling into the wheels below. However, the wide-trim grainers have nice large porches for you to sit down or lay down on for a comfortable ride, as you can see in this [picture](#).
- **Piggybacks** ([picture](#)) - These are train cars that are carrying semi-truck trailers. Unlike boxcars, grainers, and intermodals, you are more exposed to the wind and weather

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when riding these, so make sure you check the weather forecast of your destination before hopping these. They are fairly simple to hop, as you just get under the trailer and hide behind the trailer's wheels. Stay low, because you will be completely exposed and easily visible once you duck out from under the semi-trailer's wheels.

- **Gondolas** ([picture](#)) - Sometimes referred to as "junk cars", these cars often carry various pieces of, you guessed it, "junk": scraps of metal, loads of splintered wood, construction debris, you name it. Gondolas are easy to hop in any region in the USA, but beware, these trains are likely not going very far, and they may take a long time to go only a short distance. They typically have low-priority on the tracks as opposed to other trains, and even worse, they are commonly dropped off in very remote places far from any store, town, or major intersection. Most hobo's only ride gondolas if they are looking to quickly get off at the next stop so that they can catch a more dependable and comfortable car to somewhere else. These are also the WORST to catch in terms of exposure to weather. If it starts raining or snowing heavily, you are pretty much screwed. Better have a tarp or it's going to be a MISERABLE ride!

SAFETY NOTES:

- **DO NOT RIDE SUICIDE:**

If your train car does not have a solid floor, simply be patient and find another car that's coming next, or simply wait for the another train. Sure, it may seem glorious to ride suicide for the sake of

getting cool points from your traincore friends, but it's simply an unnecessary risk in which you're likely to end up as another dead trainhopper. This not only ruins everything for YOU, including your family/friends, but it ruins it for our entire subculture as a whole. It heightens security, intensifies penalties, and unnecessarily blows up our entire scene.

- **DO NOT RIDE LOADED CARS:**

If the car is loaded, that load can and will shift. And if you are on that car when it happens, you're probably going to get smashed and killed. Tons of hobo's have been smashed to death by loads of wood, scrap, metal, trash, steel coils, coal dumps, etc. The only safe car to ride is an EMPTY car.

- **DUST/DEBRIS/EXHAUST:**

Beware of dust and debris getting into your eyes/mouth if you are in a boxcar or gondola. If the train picks up over 25mph, the dust and pieces of scrap on the floor of the car will fly into your face/mouth/eyes, potentially blinding and/or choking you. Try wearing a bandana over your face, and also a pair of sunglasses if you have them, as that will help enormously. Also, if your train is going through a long tunnel, beware of inhaling toxic exhaust. The exhaust will get trapped into the tunnel, and this can start choking you. To avoid this, always wear a bandana with you, and simply wet your bandana with water, and place it over your nose and mouth. This will filter out the most of the smell from the toxic fumes, atleast long enough until your train finally clears the tunnel. A clean sock, t-shirt or even toilet tissue will also work well for this in a hunch. I personally put on a bandana and then

double-cover that with my t-shirt I already have on, both items wet.

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[–] IA_Guy 8 points 2 months ago

Do you hop while they are starting off, or while they are standing still?

[permalink](#)

[–] huckstah Trainhopper / Hitchhiker S 9 points 2 months ago

Both, it depends on the situation.

[permalink](#) [parent](#)

[–] IA_Guy 8 points 2 months ago

One more question.. ever been to Britt, IA? They have a hobo convention there. I met Steam Train Maury when I was a kid and have been interested in this stuff ever since. Always had familial responsibilities that keep me stabled though.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maurice_W._Graham

[permalink](#)

[–] huckstah Trainhopper / Hitchhiker S 11 points 2 months ago*

The so called "hobo convention" in Britt, Iowa is not a place you are going to find real modern-day hobo's. In fact, it's really just an over-hyped county fair that uses hobo nostalgia for marketing their event.

I've considered actually going one year just to spite the crowd and see how they act to a real modern-day hobo. I'd love to film it just to show people how hypocritical and condescending the "hobo convention" are to travelers like me.

Sorry, I mean none of this in offense to you, but there is somewhat of a bitter rivalry between real hobo's of today and the event organizers in Britt, Iowa. They despise us, and in return, we spite their so-called charade of a "hobo convention".

Yet despite opposed real modern day hobos, they'll continue pretending its a convention designed for hobos and trainhoppers, and that's just NOT true. Perhaps trainhoppers from the 1930's and 1940's are welcome there, as some symbol of nostalgia, but it's certainly not hobo's of today. We STILL exist, and there are thousands of us!

The real modern day hobo's have our own hobo gatherings once a year, and we keep it real by not marketing it to outsiders. It's a load of fun with lots of original hobo music, campfires, wine, smoking herb, sharing wild tales, forming traveling partners, etc.

[permalink](#) [parent](#)



[–] **IA_Guy** 6 points 2 months ago

No offense taken. I've never been there myself, nor am I now or ever have been a hobo, so I can't rightly judge the authenticity of such a thing. I'd only imagine that you are right, however, as it seems more a festival of old time hobo nostalgia than a promotion of a lifestyle.

That said, Steam Train was the real deal. He was on the rails in the 30's and again in the 70's and I've heard/read many of his stories. Perhaps he over-romanticized some aspects, but I think some of that is done here as well.

I'd happily watch a reaction video to modern hobos in Britt! Do it.

[permalink](#) [parent](#)



[–] **autowikibot** 1 point 2 months ago

Maurice W. Graham:

"Steam Train Maury" Graham (June 3, 1917 – November 18, 2006) was best known as five-time holder of the title "King of the Hobos", and was later known as "Patriarch of the Hobos". Born to a broken home in Ohio, he was shunted from father to mother to aunt to married siblings. In 1931, at the age of 14, Graham began riding the rails as a hobo during the Great Depression. He settled in Toledo, Ohio with his wife Wanda in the late 1930s, and worked as a cement mason and founded a trade school for masons. During World War II, he served in the military as a medical technician. In 1969 he returned to the hobo life for another eleven years, finally retiring in 1980.

[permalink](#) [parent](#)

 [-] **Jungies** 3 points 2 months ago

Thanks, man - you've answered the questions I had when you first posted your EDC.

I could do with a couple more pictures of the "good" and "bad" grainers, showing the trim/porch from closer, if that's possible (it might not be).

[permalink](#)

 [-] **huckstah Trainhopper / Hitchhiker** S 3 points 2 months ago*

The trim is simply the bottom edge that runs horizontally along the car. Thick trim is good, narrow trim is bad. I added some more detail to the picture, and another picture showing the porch.

[permalink](#) [parent](#)

 [-] **Jungies** 1 point 2 months ago

Thanks!

[permalink](#) [parent](#)

 [-] **CXR1037** 3 points 2 months ago

Good thing about grainers is you know once you walk up to them if they're safe or not.

As a general rule, if you aren't positively certain a ride is safe, don't catch it in a situation where there's no turning back, ie the train is picking up speed and you jump on and by the time you realize the car is unrideable, the train's going too fast for you to bail.

[permalink](#) [parent](#)

 [-] **huckstah Trainhopper / Hitchhiker** S 6 points 2 months ago

Yep...trains pick-up speed faster than most people realize. You might be able to jump on at 5mph, but you might discover it's a bad car and you have to jump off at 10-15mph.

10-15mph might not sound fast, but I can assure anyone, you do NOT want to jump off a train and land on the ground at that speed. It may look safe, but once you hit the ground, you're going to bust your ass and

your body is going to be tumbling next to those train wheels.

Don't trust your eyes. It may look slow, but it's going faster than you think.

[permalink](#) [parent](#)

[+] [deleted] 29 days ago (1 child)

 [-] **CXR1037** 3 points 2 months ago

There are a few caveats on IM, ex: misty-eyed travelers will see a baretable roll by with a bunch of BNSF 53's and think "oh I can ride this!" and jump in and realize there's just thin steel crossbeams instead of the area you showed in the picture.

Also open boxcars are probably regional. I would say ~50% of boxcars are open on UP, but that's in/out of Colton, a major industrial hub. BNSF, not as much.

[permalink](#)

 [-] **huckstah** Trainhopper / Hitchhiker S 7 points 2 months ago

Yep. I watched someone actually do that. They jumped into a 53' and thought it would have a floor, and NOPE. They had to ride suicide for like 8 hours, and it was raining. Lucky they survived.

Meanwhile, I waited only an hour for the next train going to the same destination, and I jumped the rear unit ;)

[permalink](#) [parent](#)

 [-] **cadillac_grainer** 2 points 1 month ago

I've been riding for a few years but have difficulty finding good rides on IMs. Is there any way to guess if a car is going to have a bottom on the well from a distance?

[permalink](#) [parent](#)

 [-] **beginnavagabond** 2 points 1 month ago

if there is an open boxcar, would it be safe to say they won't close it after you enter it?

[permalink](#)

 [-] **WontDieIn_A_Hospital** 3 points 2 months ago

Very informative and helpful. Especially for anyone who may not be able to find someone to show them the ropes. Just wanted to say thanks.

[permalink](#)



[–] **huckstah** Trainhopper / Hitchhiker S 4 points 2 months ago

No problem. Hope you don't die in a hospital after hopping your first car.

[permalink](#) [parent](#)



[–] **WontDieIn_A_Hospital** 3 points 2 months ago

Here's to hoping!

[permalink](#) [parent](#)



[–] **bigbadjesus** 2 points 2 months ago

What about figuring out WHERE to find an area to hop onto a train? For example, I live in Philly, and when I was a kid we used to tag around this area near I95 that was a train yard. There was a refinery further north of here and all of the train cars going/coming from there are tankers containing fuel I imagine. These never seemed like anything I would want to ride in. How would I go about finding a place where the types of cars that I should hop would be? I thought about using google maps to actually follow the tracks from that area and see where they lead to find a place.

[permalink](#)



[–] **coachfortner** 0 points 2 months ago

I live right by a busy rail yard in SE Michigan and it's always been on my bucket list to hop a freight. Often, they crawl by quite slow or are stopped outside the yard (since I've already ran into the yard bulls keeping people like me out).

My big concern is how do I tell where a train is going. From my perspective, heading north only goes in one direction. But heading south towards the Detroit (ick) or Toledo or wherever concerns me more.

Is it just an educated guess for you?

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